

Article

# Why the Covenant Worked: On the Institutional Foundations of the American Civil Religion

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**Abstract:** Scholars of American civil religion (ACR) have paid insufficient attention to the micro-level processes through which civil religious ideas have historically influenced beliefs and behavior. We know little about what makes such appeals meaningful to average Americans (assuming they are meaningful); nor do we know much about the mechanisms through which abstract religious themes and imagery come to be associated with specific policy aims, or what Robert Bellah called “national goals.” This article argues that a renewed focus on the relationship between civil religion and organized religion can help fill this gap in the literature. More specifically, I draw attention to three mainline Protestant institutions that for much of the twentieth-century were instrumental both in cultivating respect for the national civic faith and in connecting its abstract ideals to concrete reform programs: namely, the clergy, the state and local church councils, and the policy-oriented departments of the National Council of Churches (NCC). Finally, I argue that a fresh look at the relationship between civil religion and “church religion” sheds new light on the (arguably) diminished role of civil religious appeals in the present. If, as Bellah claimed in his later writings, ACR appeals have lost much of their power to motivate support for shared national goals, it is at least in part because the formal religious networks through which they once were transmitted and interpreted have largely collapsed.

**Keywords:** civil religion; Robert Bellah; mainline Protestantism; civil rights

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In the decades since the publication of Robert Bellah’s seminal early writings on the American civil religion (ACR), scholarly discussions of the subject have focused almost entirely on identifying and interrogating the abstract ideas that are said to comprise the core of our national civic faith. Consequently, there is a rich body of literature describing how politicians and public intellectuals have used religious or quasi-religious themes and concepts—e.g., national destiny, the covenant, collective sin and redemption—to mobilize popular support for preferred policies. And there is an equally rich body of literature questioning whether such appeals are really so influential, or whether their influence on the course of American political development has been positive or negative. But for all that has been written about the substance and merits of the American civil religion, scholars have had relatively little to say about how ACR appeals operate at the micro level. We know little about what makes such appeals meaningful to average Americans (assuming they are meaningful); nor do we know much about the mechanisms through which the abstract ideas at the heart of the ACR are transmitted to average citizens or connected to concrete policy goals (see e.g., [Murphy 2011](#); [Lienesch 2018](#)).

In this article, I argue that a renewed focus on the relationship between civil religion and organized religion can help fill this gap in the literature. While Bellah and other early students of American civil religion tended to downplay the role of churches and other religious bodies in cultivating allegiance to the ACR, we shall see that formal religious bodies have traditionally ranked among the most important conduits for ACR appeals. From the turn of the twentieth century until the late 1960s, the national civic faith derived much of its power from the fact that millions of Americans were embedded in organized religious networks whose leaders not only made regular use of civil religious themes and ideas, but also carried out the micro-level work of connecting these open-ended principles and concepts to specific

reform programs. A fresh look at the relationship between civil religion and “church religion” may also shed new light on the (arguably) diminished role of civil religious appeals in the present. If, as Bellah claimed in his later writings, ACR appeals have lost much of their power to motivate support for shared national goals, it is at least in part because the formal religious networks through which they once were transmitted and interpreted have largely collapsed.

### 1. Civil Religion and Organized Religion: Understanding the Relationship

To be sure, Bellah and other early theorists of American civil religion were well aware that the United States could not have developed a robust civic faith absent high rates of formal religious participation. The ideas at the core of the ACR were, after all, religious ideas; if Americans overwhelmingly believed in a deity who was active in world affairs, and who took a personal interest in the success or failure of the American democratic experiment, it was at least in part because they regularly encountered these ideas in their places of worship. And yet, the role afforded formal religious bodies in perpetuating the ACR was typically quite limited, consisting mainly of buttressing average citizens’ belief in a higher power who would one day judge the nations. Mobilizing citizens on behalf of concrete “national goals” was generally described as a job for politicians, not ministers. As Bellah explained in his original article, revered political leaders such as Abraham Lincoln had consistently provided “a higher level of religious insight” into national problems than “the leaders of the churches” (Bellah 2005, p. 49).

Why did early civil religion scholars discount the churches’ role as practical interpreters of civil religious ideas? The answer can be traced in part to the theory, first developed by Alexis de Tocqueville, that America’s vibrant religious landscape was underpinned by a strict separation of church and state. Having “shaken off the authority of the pope,” Tocqueville observed, the men and women who settled “British America” had little tolerance for religious leaders who sought to exercise Earthly authority (quoted in Bellah 2005, p. 50). Although American religion was from the outset greatly concerned with the practical business of improving society, such efforts were usually “voluntary” in nature, and—at least after the collapse of the New England religious establishments—rarely relied on the coercive power of the state (Lipset 1963). As Bellah put the point, “Under the doctrine of religious liberty, an exceptionally wide sphere of personal piety and voluntary social action was left to the churches. But the churches were neither to control the state nor be controlled by it” (Bellah 2005, p. 46). Religious leaders who violated their end of the bargain by attempting to seize the levers of official power risked alienating their congregations, as well as potential converts. But so long as they confined their political commentary to reaffirming the abstract tenets of republican government, the churches tended to remain full (Mead 1974; Hammond 1976, p. 176).

A second reason why Bellah and others may have discounted the churches’ role in fleshing out the substance of the American civil religion is that they saw little empirical evidence that religious elites were capable of performing this task. Writing in the late 1960s and early 1970s, at a time when the mainline Protestant churches were trying and failing to shape the national debates over Vietnam and African American civil rights, it seemed clear that few American churchgoers deferred to their nominal religious leaders on divisive political questions (Hadden 1969; also see Gill 2011). Nor was the “relative impotence [of the churches] . . . in contemporary moral life” understood to be a recent development (Hammond 1976, p. 176). In 1976, Bellah’s collaborator Phillip Hammond observed that American religious leaders had sponsored “little in the way of national change since pietistic Protestants got prohibition imposed” (Hammond 1976, p. 176). Add to this the ongoing sexual revolution, and it appeared that the churches were rapidly losing whatever direct authority over the everyday lives of their parishioners they had once possessed. Formal religious bodies that could no longer enforce even the most basic standards of personal morality were unlikely to succeed in mobilizing support for policies that ran counter to the interests or prejudices of their parishioners, or so the argument went (Bellah 1975, p. 142).

It should be noted that Bellah, in his later works, did develop a greater appreciation for the role that the nation’s churches had played in mobilizing public support for major political reforms, particularly

during the nineteenth century. In *The Broken Covenant*, for example, he acknowledged that the “neutral deistic language” of early American civil religion would have had little practical effect absent “a burgeoning revivalism” that filled “[c]old external forms” with a “warm inner life” that “impressed [itself] into the imaginative life of the [American] people.” It was “precisely this dynamic combination of public form and private meaning” that, from the Second Great Awakening forward, endowed civil religious appeals with the power to shape public opinion (Bellah 1975, p. 45; also see Bortolini 2012, pp. 198–99). And yet, Bellah’s conception of what he called “church religion” remained, even in these later essays, largely detached from actual churches. It was not the authority of particular clergymen or denominational leaders that had compelled slavery opponents and other nineteenth-century Americans to extraordinary acts of self-sacrifice on behalf of ambitious national goals. Rather, it was a kind of free-floating evangelical revivalism—an “intense, immediate, and personal” force whose comings and goings were more or less impossible to predict (Bellah 1975, p. 48).

More recently, a handful of scholars have begun to reassess the relationship between civil religion and organized religion. Andrew Murphy, without explicitly mentioning formal religious bodies, has rightly suggested that scholars pay greater attention to “the more localized and contested ground-level” processes through which civil religious ideas are formulated, debated, and disseminated (Murphy 2011, pp. 231, 233). Michael Lienesch, in an article examining the Protestant response to World War I, has helpfully documented the “central role” of “religious institutions” both in developing “a sacralized form of patriotic nationalism” and in critiquing the militaristic aims that have so often motivated civil religious appeals. Lienesch rightly notes that “the relationships between civil religion and more conventional forms of organized religion are often close and at times contentious,” and that Protestant religious leaders have developed “a variety of . . . competing versions” of the American civil religion, often in direct competition with one another (Lienesch 2018, pp. 93, 99). Robert Putnam and David Campbell, in a work featuring careful case studies of several religious congregations, have likewise drawn attention to the “civic role” of American churches, arguing that religious engagement may simultaneously foster patriotic sentiments and toleration of diversity (Putnam and Campbell, pp. 517–21). Other scholars, including Phillip Gorski and Raymond Haberski, have documented the often bitter internal debates concerning civil religion that have regularly consumed American religious communities, particularly during times of national crisis (Gorski 2017; Haberski 2012).

These scholars deserve much credit for highlighting the contested nature of American civil religion—and for pointing out that formal religious bodies, perhaps more than any other segment of civil society, have helped shape the parameters of the debate. And yet, studies examining how particular religious bodies have used civil religious appeals to mobilize support or opposition to specific policy goals remain surprisingly rare. The paucity of work in this area is both curious and unfortunate, since much of the civil religion debate—from 1967 to today—has centered on the empirical question of whether civil religious appeals have in fact played a meaningful role in American political development. Bellah, for his part, was insistent that the ACR had frequently been instrumental in shaping national policy, and that its impact was felt most keenly in campaigns to advance landmark egalitarian reforms, such as the 1964 Civil Rights Act and Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society (Bellah 2005, pp. 46, 51). Many of Bellah’s critics, in contrast, saw little evidence that civil religious appeals had succeeded in shaping average citizens’ thinking concerning important policy questions; others objected that the American civil religion’s core signs, symbols, and ideas were so amorphous that they could be used to justify almost any imaginable political program—in which case the concept was of equally little use in explaining the evolution of national policy (e.g., Porterfield 1994).

In what follows, I argue that Bellah was both right and wrong—right to believe that civil religious appeals had been instrumental in advancing egalitarian policy aims, but wrong to discount the role of Protestant, Jewish, and Catholic elites and institutions in connecting abstract civil religious appeals to concrete policy programs. At the elite level, it is clear that leaders of all three faiths, often working in tandem, helped cultivate respect for the substantive values, such as racial equality and religious

toleration, that Bellah linked to the ACR (see e.g., Wall 2008; Schultz 2011). My primary focus here, however, will be on the institutional infrastructure of mainline Protestantism. This decision reflects the fact that mainline Protestants were for much of the twentieth century the nation's largest faith community, meaning mainline elites were particularly well positioned to shape public opinion on the pressing issues of the day. Moreover, by focusing on a single faith, we can gain greater insight into the processes through which average believers were encouraged to view specific reforms as consistent with the core ideals of the ACR. Below, I highlight three mainline Protestant institutions that were particularly effective at using religious themes and imagery to build support for egalitarian reforms: the clergy, the state and local church councils, and the policy-oriented departments of the National Council of Churches (NCC).

## 2. The Mainline Protestant Clergy

During the early years of the twentieth century, the nation's largest "mainline" Protestant denominations—including the Methodists, Northern Baptists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists—coalesced around an ambitious and remarkably concrete program of social reform that centered on improving the lives of industrial workers and other marginalized citizens. Initially, the churches focused most of their social activism on labor relations and working conditions, as when delegates to the inaugural meeting of the Federal Council of Churches (FCC) adopted a "Social Creed" calling for a living wage, shorter working hours, and new regulations to protect women, children, and other vulnerable classes of workers (Sanford 1909, pp. 238–39; Dorrien 2009, pp. 111–12). During the 1920s and 1930s, the mainline social vision expanded to include issues of racial, ethnic, and religious diversity. Partly in response to the growth of nativist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan, the mainline churches launched new programs to educate white churchgoers about the evils of lynching and segregation, as well as several interfaith initiatives that aimed to bring Protestants into closer communion with their Jewish and Catholic neighbors (MacFarland 1948, pp. 209, 217; Federal Council of Churches 1923; Kaufmann 2004; Wall 2008; Schultz 2011). Following World War II, the mainline churches added other policy goals to their agendas, including promoting international cooperation, arms control efforts, and similar initiatives that seemed likely to ease Cold War tensions (King 1989; Preston 2012).

Like the political leaders who were the focus of Bellah's writings on civil religion, mainline church officials routinely couched their policy appeals in the signs and symbols of the ACR, arguing that the nation was party to a divine covenant, and that its religious leaders had been tasked with the "prophetic" responsibility of alerting citizens to collective sins—from lynching to child labor—that threatened to undermine America's witness to the wider world (Findlay 1993; Miller 1958, pp. 217–18). At the same time, Protestant leaders knew that formal pronouncements, by themselves, rarely succeeded in convincing large numbers of churchgoers to support major social or political reforms. To shape public opinion, they knew, it would be necessary to embed their egalitarian social vision in the *institutions* that structured the religious lives of individual believers and congregations.

At the congregational level, the most important source of ethical instruction was, of course, the local minister. Denominational leaders therefore took great care to ensure that seminary-trained ministers—who comprised the bulk of the mainline clergy—were well versed in the social ideals of their parent denominations. Beginning around the turn of the century, church officials added social ethics courses to the standard seminary curriculum, churning out a new crop of ministers who believed that efforts to improve working conditions and protect vulnerable laborers represented a critical step in the coming of the Kingdom (Dorrien 2009, pp. 6–51). Several prestigious seminaries and divinity schools—Union Theological Seminary, the University of Chicago, the Episcopal Theological School—went so far as to require students to work several hours per week at local settlement houses or missions with the aim of highlighting the ways in which poverty and exploitative labor practices worked to undermine the churches' evangelistic mission (Abell 1962, p. 231). Significantly, most such programs survived the theological battles of the 1920s; even as seminary faculties divided into competing camps

of modernists and fundamentalists, most retained their commitment to educating ministers in the practical business of social reform (Miller 2007, p. 162).

In the 1930s, rudimentary public opinion studies revealed that the vast majority of mainline clergymen remained committed to the ideals of their seminary days after they accepted pastorates. In 1935, for example, the Roosevelt administration wrote to more than 120,000 clergymen, asking for their views on Social Security, the public works program, and other New Deal initiatives. Remarkably, more than 30,000 of the recipients responded, the vast majority expressing strong support for the administration's domestic program (Billington and Clark 1986). More to the point, many of these letters characterized core New Deal initiatives, such as old-age pensions and unemployment insurance, as divinely inspired programs that promised to fulfill the nation's covenantal obligations toward its marginalized citizens. A Presbyterian clergyman wrote that the Social Security Act was "in line with the social progress of Christianity and the Christian Church," reminding FDR that "[t]he church . . . is always ready to cooperate to the utmost of its ability . . . to better the material and spiritual conditions and life of the American people" (Dewar 1935). A Methodist pastor likewise judged the "Social Security Measure . . . one of, if not the greatest statutes . . . any Government has ever produced. It carries out the gist of the Social Creed of the Churches of America, some things the Christian organizations of the world have urged and stood [for] through the centuries" (Martin 1935). Other ministers employed imagery from Exodus, with Roosevelt standing in for Moses, and the United States for Israel. God had chosen FDR to lead the nation through this "trying hour," wrote a small-town Illinois pastor, and "I sincerely trust that the 'Burning Bush' that fired Moses, will rekindle in you a new passion for leading a hungry-souled people to a new Canaan" (Hayden 1935; also see Isetti 1996).

The Roosevelt administration's 1935 survey was, of course, a highly unscientific endeavor, and many skeptics alleged that administration critics, viewing the President's letter as a political stunt, had not bothered to respond, thereby skewing the results. But in the late 1940s, more sophisticated opinion polls demonstrated that the apparent outpouring of clergy support for the New Deal was likely not an artifact of sampling bias. In 1949, for example, the Princeton-based Opinion Research Corporation asked 1500 randomly selected Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish clergymen a battery of questions concerning the ethics of capitalism, the state of labor relations, and whether corporations and business leaders were meeting their ethical obligations to the community. The poll's most important finding was that most clergymen adopted a prophetic view of economic questions, believing it their role to criticize corporations that failed to provide citizens with "good working conditions, fair and just wages . . . and honest products." Although Jewish and Catholic clergymen were the most consistently critical of the "American business system," most Protestant ministers—or at least solid pluralities—agreed that the nation's corporations were falling short of the mark. For example, 58 percent of Protestant respondents agreed that there was an "inherent conflict between business as it exists in this country and Christian . . . ideals and principles" (compared to 36 percent who disagreed); 45 percent believed there was "little economic justice in the way our business system distributes wealth" (compared to 39 percent who disagreed with the statement); and 53 percent agreed that American corporations were guilty of wasting natural resources (compared to 37 percent who disagreed) (Opinion Research Corporation 1949).

How often did such convictions find their way into Sunday morning sermons? Although there is no way to answer this question with any degree of precision, such evidence as exists suggests that most ministers viewed the inculcation of socio-ethical ideals as an important part of their job descriptions. While endorsements of particular candidates or parties were rare (and potentially problematic under the tax code), endorsements of broader *ideals*, such as economic stewardship and racial equality, were apparently common. The 1949 clergy survey, conducted at a time of intense popular concern about the state of the postwar economy, found that 58 percent of Protestant ministers had recently addressed "business or economic problems" in their sermons (Opinion Research Corporation 1949). Fifteen years later, as the push for the 1964 Civil Rights Act reached its climax, more than two out of three (69 percent) of Northern white Protestants who belonged to a church reported that "problems



of race relations” had been discussed at their places of worship. And of those who had encountered civil rights-related messages, a remarkable 91 percent reported that their “minister[s]” believed that “religion or the Bible favor[s] ... integration” ([American National Election Studies 1964](#); see also [Compton Forthcoming](#)).

If parish clergymen were generally supportive of the ideals articulated in the 1908 Social Creed, *campus* clergymen were even more enthusiastic. Born in the years around 1900, the modern campus ministry took shape when church leaders awoke to the fact that mandatory religious training had largely disappeared from the standard curriculum at top-tier universities. Convinced that impressionable young men (and later women) should not be left to their own devices in matters of faith, most Protestant-affiliated private universities created a chaplain’s office, whose functions included counseling students, advising religious student groups, and coordinating optional religious services and educational programming. At public universities the same functions were typically performed by campus ministers hired by the mainline denominations themselves, who operated out of churches or offices within easy walking distance of the campus. Significantly, the number of chaplains and campus ministers exploded in the immediate aftermath of World War II—more than doubling in the case of chaplains—as the mainline churches, suddenly flush with cash, assumed the responsibility of ministering to the hundreds of thousands of G.I. Bill-funded students who were inundating the nation’s campuses ([Hammond 1966](#), pp. 4–5).

The number of Americans influenced by campus clergymen was, of course, small relative to the number reached by parish clergymen. But the presence in large numbers of idealistic ministers on the nation’s college campuses nonetheless ensured that upwardly mobile men—and eventually women—would be encouraged to view contemporary social problems in light of the social teachings of their respective denominations. In many cases, campus clergymen were explicitly instructed to focus their efforts on social ethics. Methodist guidelines advised campus ministers to bear “prophetic witness” to the nation’s students, and to “foster a Christian community” that would prepare students to confront injustice in the wider world ([Hammond 1966](#), pp. 43–44). Surveys of campus clergymen indicated that most eagerly embraced the assignment. Researchers noted, for example, that university ministers were significantly more liberal in their views on race relations, economic inequality, and foreign policy than parish ministers.<sup>1</sup> It was perhaps only natural, then, that campus ministers’ offices and student ecumenical groups such as the campus “Y’s” became organizing hubs for students who felt called to protest against racial discrimination or other social injustices ([Hammond 1966](#), pp. 10–11; [Rossinow 1998](#), pp. 93–133; [Heineman 1993](#), p. 88).

Not surprisingly, mid-century conservatives regularly groused about the liberal bias of the mainline Protestant clergy. Many went so far as to claim, rather implausibly, that the nation’s ministers were single-handedly blocking efforts to roll back the social welfare and labor reforms of the 1930s and 1940s. This was the view of the wealthy conservative activist J. Howard Pew, and also of officials at the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM); and during the 1950s, both Pew and NAM poured hundreds of thousands of dollars into programs designed to cure Protestant clergymen of their social democratic tendencies ([Fones-Wolf 1994](#); [Kruse 2015](#); [Grem 2016](#)). Such clergy “education” initiatives received tacit—and in some cases explicit—support from right-leaning celebrity ministers like Billy Graham and Norman Vincent Peale. And yet, at least initially, they bore surprisingly little fruit. Indeed, most of the organizations founded for the purpose of alerting clergymen to the evils of the social welfare state—for example, Spiritual Mobilization and the Christian Freedom Foundation—struggled to gain even a few hundred dues-paying members. Moreover, through the end of the 1950s, polls commissioned by Pew and other conservative activists found that their efforts had produced little change in the social and political views of average clergymen. Far from turning against the welfare

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<sup>1</sup> An early 1960s survey of 1000 campus ministers found that 53 percent judged their own denominations “too conservative in the field of social action” (as compared to 17 percent of parish ministers) ([Hammond 1966](#), p. 43).

state, most ministers continued to view it as a divinely-sanctioned step toward the creation of a more just society ([Compton Forthcoming](#)).

### 3. The Church Council Network

During the early twentieth century, mainline Protestant elites strongly encouraged the formation of state and local councils of churches—intermediate bodies that, while fully under the control of local clergymen and lay leaders, were intended to provide national religious leaders with an organic link to the men and women in the pews. Although local councils (or federations) of churches were not unheard of in the nineteenth century, the idea grew in popularity after the Federal Council of Churches (FCC)—the major umbrella group for the mainline Protestant denominations—began promoting it in the 1910s. By the late 1920s, local councils staffed by paid professionals were operating in at least 49 cities, while volunteer councils were operating in hundreds of smaller communities. The largest local councils, such as those in New York and Chicago, employed ten or more full-time staff members and controlled annual budgets of as much as \$100,000 (in 1920s dollars) ([Douglass 1930](#), pp. 51, 229).<sup>2</sup> And although not all Protestant churches participated in state or local councils—efforts to incorporate black churches were half-hearted at best—contemporaneous studies found that participation rates in Northeastern and Midwestern cities were often above 50 percent, and in some cases as high as 90 percent.<sup>3</sup> (White Protestants in the Southern and Border states, who strongly objected to the FCC’s liberal positions on racial issues, mostly shunned the federation movement).

Many of the functions performed by local church councils were purely ecclesiastical in nature—tasks such as conducting community surveys, training Sunday School teachers, and coordinating the location of new churches. Arguably their most important function, however, was to serve as a mouthpiece for Protestant clergymen and lay leaders who wished to express their views on issues of public concern. A study of 29 local councils conducted in the late 1920s found that 86 percent had recently “agitated for reform on specific issues,” and more than two-thirds had formally endorsed or opposed a particular piece of legislation. In cities such as Detroit, Pittsburgh, and Chicago, as much as fifty percent of the local council’s communication with member churches concerned public affairs; popular subjects included Sabbath observance, drinking, and gambling, but systemic questions of economic justice and race relations also occupied a prominent place on the agendas of these and other councils ([Douglass 1930](#), pp. 379, 372). Significantly, local councils soon proved themselves capable of mobilizing large numbers of churchgoers on behalf of specific causes. In 1928, for example, Massachusetts Senator David Walsh estimated that a state federation of churches letter-writing campaign on behalf of the Kellogg–Briand Pact was responsible for one-third of all the mail received by his office; in Michigan, a similar campaign sponsored by the Detroit Federation of Churches convinced more than 1000 congregations to petition their representatives ([Douglass 1930](#), p. 390).

Another function of the local church council was to serve as a conduit for educational and other materials generated at FCC headquarters. In a typical year, FCC department heads bombarded their local counterparts with dozens of communiqués, many of which touched on such sensitive issues as race relations, industrial reform, and war and peace.<sup>4</sup> Realizing that the church council network offered an invaluable link to the hinterlands, FCC officials relied on it both to educate average churchgoers about favored reforms, and also to encourage popular demonstrations of support. During the Depression

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<sup>2</sup> [Douglass \(1930\)](#) reports that the median federation budget was \$11,000, and that fully one-fourth of federations had annual budgets of \$30,000 or more.

<sup>3</sup> [Douglass \(1930, p. 95; 1924, p. 174\)](#) reports the participation rates in some representative cities as follows: Chicago (43 percent), Detroit (52 percent), Pittsburgh (54 percent), St. Louis (90 percent).

<sup>4</sup> As [Sanderson \(1960, p. 143\)](#) points out, most local councils modeled their organizational structures on the Federal Council, so that both national and local bodies featured departments dedicated to comity, evangelism, social service, religious education, and the like. For obvious reasons, this arrangement fostered cooperation between state, local, and national officials working on similar issues.

years, for example, the FCC department heads kept state and local council leaders well supplied with educational materials that painted such Roosevelt administration initiatives as unemployment insurance, the National Recovery Administration (NRA) industrial codes, and the workers' rights provisions of the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) in a highly favorable light. Believing that such programs were in keeping with the longstanding social ideals of the mainline churches, FCC officials urged state and local religious leaders to participate in a "program of moral and spiritual strengthening" designed to ensure that the "superstructure" of the nation's new economic order would "rest not upon the sand but upon the rock" (McKee 1954, p. 175). In response, many local councils took the initiative to organize events, such as industrial conferences and local educational sessions, that aimed to educate average Americans about the administration's efforts to assist unemployed workers and revive the nation's moribund economy (Compton Forthcoming).

The true heyday of the state and local church council network did not arrive until the post-World War II period, however. Finding themselves suddenly inundated with new members and flush with cash, the mainline Protestant churches poured money into ecumenical projects, and the number of state and local church councils exploded. Between the late 1930s and mid-1950s, the number of professionally staffed church councils grew from a few dozen to a little over two hundred; by the mid-1960s, that figure would grow to nearly 300 (Landis 1965). Payrolls expanded as well; by 1959, the nation's local church councils employed around 700 people and commanded annual budgets in excess of \$13 million (\$113 million in 2019 dollars) (Sanderson 1960, pp. 205–11). In rural areas where people and resources were scarce, Protestant church councils staffed by volunteers became increasingly common; by the early 1960s, the National Council of Churches—the successor to the FCC—had contact information for 650 of them (Landis 1963).

Buoyed by this infusion of resources, church councils in the Northeastern and Midwestern states pursued a robust program of social activism. In the immediate postwar period, the major focus was promoting peace and international cooperation. This meant, among other things, building support for the fledgling United Nations, directing aid to war torn European nations, and supporting arms control and other initiatives that seemed likely to ratchet down Cold War tensions. Perhaps the most popular manifestation of pro-UN sentiment took place on Halloween, when hundreds of thousands of Sunday School children, typically at the behest of local church councils, carried small orange boxes in which they collected donations for United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund's (UNICEF) efforts to feed and clothe children in foreign lands (Massachusetts Council of Churches 1956, p. E23; Indiana Council of Churches 1960, p. 2; Council of Churches of Buffalo and Erie County 1957).<sup>5</sup> For older children, local church councils sponsored "Know Your United Nations" essay contests, as well as frequent trips to church youth seminars at the U.N. Headquarters in New York. In hundreds of American communities, including such out-of-the-way places as Terre Haute, Indiana, church councils not only observed a "United Nations Sunday" (during which ministers were urged to incorporate material on the U.N. into their sermons) but also took the lead in organizing community-wide "U.N. Week" events at schools and other secular venues (Compton Forthcoming). With few exceptions, these and other efforts at promoting a more peaceful world were framed as efforts to fulfill the nation's God-given destiny. As the leaders of the Albany Federation of Churches wrote in publicity materials for a 1948 "Pray for Peace" initiative—which included weekly prayer services, twice-daily radio broadcasts, and weekly newspaper advertisements—God had called Americans to labor "together in the Kingdom's work," putting their "trust in God's leadership" and "keep[ing] ever before [them] a vision of a better world" (Federation of Churches of Albany and Vicinity 1948, pp. 1–2).

In the mid-1950s, following the Supreme Court's landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, many Northern church councils shifted their focus to civil rights, urging support for school integration

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<sup>5</sup> In most cities, the program was spearheaded by the local council of churches or the United Church Women. Typically, a wide range of civic and religious groups—including the Girl and Boy Scouts, as well as Jewish and Catholic groups—joined together to form a coordinating committee.



and fair housing laws, the repeal of anti-miscegenation laws, and a variety of other reforms. Like the foreign policy campaigns of the late 1940s and early 1950s, pro-civil rights appeals were regularly framed as efforts to fulfill the nation's providential mission, or else to remedy injustices that violated the nation's covenantal commitments, and for which all white Americans shared some blame. The Cleveland Area Church Federation, which was particularly active in promoting fair housing laws, made its views known through a full-page newspaper advertisement headlined "He Died for All." By directing readers' attention to Christ's sacrifice on the cross, the ads sought to remind churchgoers that racial segregation, which violated the Christian principle of the equal "dignity of man," was a collective sin that required immediate remedial action. God had called Americans not only to avoid overt acts of racism in their personal lives, but also to work together to promote the "genuine and full participation" in civic life of all citizens (Cleveland Area Church Federation 1963).

The theme of providential duty was at the heart of the local church councils' critical efforts in support of what became the Civil Rights Act of 1964. In this case, local council officials followed the lead of the National Council of Churches' Commission on Religion and Race (CORR), a hastily formed body that was tasked with coordinating the Protestant churches' pro-civil rights lobbying efforts. From the group's inception, the leaders of CORR saw their principal mission as convincing average churchgoers that existing forms of racial inequality constituted "blasphemy against God," and a denial of the nation's founding promise to recognize the equal "worth which God has given to all citizens" (Blake 1963). They soon found a ready partner in the nation's state and local church councils. As early as 1963, participants in the annual meeting of the Association of Council Secretaries—the major professional group for local church council employees—pledged to "cooperate fully" with the Kennedy administration's attempts to steer a meaningful civil rights bill through Congress (Association of Council Secretaries 1963). Working closely with CORR, local council officials orchestrated a concerted campaign to pressure the handful of Midwestern Senators and Representatives who were believed to hold the balance of power in the congressional debate over civil rights. Officials in Colorado, Illinois, Minnesota, Nebraska, and Ohio organized statewide "legislative conferences" that brought together clergymen, church officials, and lay leaders to discuss the specifics of the President's bill, as well as the theological basis for church involvement. Church officials also took their message directly to the men and women in the pews, arranging for educational teams composed of clergymen, theologians, representatives of the major African-American civil rights groups, and legislative experts to fan out across Nebraska, Indiana, Iowa, South Dakota, Illinois, and Ohio (Compton Forthcoming; see also Findlay 1993, pp. 48–54; Hedgeman 1977, pp. 97–100).

Perhaps the local councils' most important contribution to the civil rights push, however, was to help organize massive letter-writing campaigns during critical junctures in the Civil Rights Act's perilous journey through the House and Senate. When the draft version of the civil rights bill stalled in the House Judiciary Committee, and again when it appeared to be at risk of being defeated by a Southern filibuster, the NCC's Robert Spike urged local council officials to inundate members of Congress with a wave of pro-civil rights mail. Spike also provided local council leaders with a list of practical suggestions that included stocking church pews with paper, envelopes, and pencils to facilitate letter-writing; having churches pay the cost of postage for letters to local members of Congress; collecting letters in the offering plate; and ensuring that commemorative activities were thoroughly covered by "local news media—press, radio, and television" (Spike 1963). His appeals had the desired effect, as pro-civil rights letters poured into Congress from congregations, church civil rights committees, and local Protestant councils. In the judgment of many seasoned congressional correspondents, the letter-writing campaign on behalf of the civil rights bill dwarfed previous efforts in this vein (Evans and Novak 1964). As one beleaguered Midwestern Senator informed a *Wall Street Journal* reporter, his office had been inundated with pro-civil rights mail, and most of the "letterheads [seemed to] indicate a church-inspired campaign" (Landauer 1963; also see Findlay 1993, p. 57).

In the end, it was the solid support of Midwestern Republicans in both the House and the Senate that assured the 1964 Civil Rights Act's passage (Findlay 1993, p. 54). Because most of the pivotal

votes came from members representing predominately white and rural districts, most contemporary observers credited (or else blamed) mainline Protestant church officials for mobilizing Midwestern support for the bill. The syndicated columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak observed that “[n]ot since Prohibition” had the nation’s clergymen “influenced political action in Congress” as they were “now doing on behalf of President Johnson’s civil rights bill” (Evans and Novak 1964). Although few pundits directly referenced the work of the local church councils, CORR officials readily acknowledged that the councils had provided the critical communications network that had allowed them to mobilize large numbers of churchgoers in far flung areas of the country, and often on short notice (Hedgeman 1977, pp. 99–100).

#### 4. The National Council of Churches (NCC)

Today, to the extent that it is remembered at all, the National Council of Churches (NCC) is often described as an elite-dominated, top-heavy body whose left-leaning pronouncements mostly escaped the notice of average churchgoers. In reality, the organization was designed to be, and for a time actually functioned as, a deliberative forum in which church officials and lay leaders debated current policy dilemmas in the light of Protestant ethical ideals. Because its myriad committees and departments drew members from across the denominational and professional spectrum, the NCC was able, at least during the 1950s and early 1960s, to present itself as the voice of American Protestantism writ large. More than any other national ecumenical body, it succeeded in framing national policy debates over civil rights and economic redistribution as religious tests for the nation: to take the side of marginalized groups and citizens was to further America’s providential mission; to defend the status quo was to violate the nation’s special covenant.

Launched with great fanfare in 1950, the NCC was the product of a merger between the Federal Council of Churches (FCC) and eleven small Protestant denominations that had previously remained aloof from ecumenical activities. The name change—from *Federal Council* to *National Council*—was part of a larger rebranding effort. In short, the NCC’s founders envisioned an ecumenical organization that would carry on most of the FCC’s major programs while shedding its left-of-center reputation. The FCC’s staff and organizational structure were carried over largely intact, though some departments were renamed, probably in the hope of rendering them less offensive to potential donors. Although the changes were largely cosmetic, the makeover proved a smashing success. During the 1950s, President Eisenhower and prominent members of his cabinet, such as John Foster Dulles, regularly addressed Council gatherings, often sprinkling their speeches with allusions to the national civic faith. In October 1958, Eisenhower himself laid the cornerstone of the NCC’s sparkling new headquarters at the Interfaith Center in Morningside Heights (Findlay 1993, pp. 11–12). The President’s speech, delivered before an audience of 30,000, invoked George Washington’s conviction that “national morality [can] not be maintained without religious principle.” In the United States, Eisenhower declared, “our churches have always been sturdy defenders of the . . . God-given rights of each citizen. They have sought to protect, to broaden and to sustain the historic laws of justice and truth and honor which are the foundations of our community life. May they always do so” (Kihss 1958).

The National Council’s deliberative mission was centered in a series of departments whose members pledged to apply Protestant ethical principles to contemporary problems. Some departments were dedicated to purely religious subjects such as evangelism and religious broadcasting, but many were focused on concrete social problems like racism and poverty. In both cases, a small professional staff of council employees performed administrative duties, while the dozens of clergymen and lay leaders who comprised its membership (and who typically met three to four times per year) ultimately set the agenda.

The heads of policy-oriented departments were particularly focused on recruiting a professionally diverse membership—the better to present their edicts as the considered judgments of the nation’s churchgoing population. The Department of the Church and Economic Life (DCEL), which addressed the religious aspects of modern economic problems, featured 125 members, including several prominent

executives, a roughly equal number of labor officials, as well as representatives from agriculture, academia, and the clergy. In terms of politics, the typical DCEL member was a moderate Republican, and several were close advisors of President Eisenhower. Early recruits from the business community included Studebaker's Paul G. Hoffman, J. Irwin Miller of the Cummins Engine Company, Chester I. Barnard of New Jersey Bell, W. Howard Chase of General Foods, Robert E. Wilson of Standard Oil, and W. Walter Williams of Continental Mortgage (Poethig 1994; Compton Forthcoming). Yet the group also included several active members whose views fell well to the left of the mainstream. One was Jerry Voorhis, the former California Congressman who, after losing his seat to a redbaiting Richard Nixon in 1946, became a leading figure in the cooperative movement. The Reuther brothers—Walter and Victor—who served as president and educational director, respectively, of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), also were members. Looking back on his time with the DCEL, Voorhis was most impressed by the fact that the group's members were able to set aside partisan differences and develop a "deep respect for one another around our common commitment to the Christian gospel." He had developed close friendships with several of the DCEL's conservative business leaders, he told an interviewer in the late 1970s, "despite the fact that we were always on opposite sides of the fence politically" and locked horns "in almost every meeting" (Voorhis 1976).

During the 1950s, most DCEL members, including those who hailed from the corporate world, viewed the group's central mission as defending the New Deal-era welfare state from critics on both the right and the left. In 1952, for example, the DCEL oversaw the publication by Harper and Brothers of *Goals of Economic Life*, an edited volume featuring contributions from some of the nation's leading economists, sociologists, and theologians.<sup>6</sup> Echoing the argument of Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.'s *The Vital Center* (Schlesinger 1949), the book's major theme was that the economic middle ground between Communism and laissez-faire offered the surest foundation for liberal democracy. Wealthy individuals and corporations were essential to the nation's economic wellbeing, but as trustees of God-given resources they were ethically obligated to contribute to programs, like Social Security and unemployment insurance, that eased the burdens of their less fortunate neighbors. Five additional volumes on the relationship between God and Mammon followed, each one offering a variation on a common theme: that Americans experiencing the "flush of a prosperity such as this nation has never experienced" should not be lulled into "smug complacency," but should instead contemplate how the nation's unprecedented material abundance might be used to further the purposes of the Almighty (Childs and Cater 1954, "Foreword," n.p.).

Prominent DCEL members including Cummins Engine's Miller and Studebaker's Hoffman developed this theme in their frequent speeches to church groups. In a 1952 speech to a Denver church gathering, Miller explained that the DCEL's ultimate aim was to cure American society of its "tragic" tendency to "recognize Christ's role in individual life" while simultaneously promoting "irresponsible selfishness in its public and group life." This meant, among other things, awakening "the middle class and the well-to-do" to the struggles of the working class. It meant making a case for "wages justly determined, for a concept of work that is dignified and rewarding, and [providing workers with] the voice in industry that Christian principles and democratic tradition demand" (Miller 1953). Hoffman, who regularly addressed church groups, likewise couched his message in the language of "duty" and "responsibility." His point in stressing individual responsibility, however, was not to cast aspersions on the welfare state, but rather to highlight citizens' duties towards their neighbors—duties that were all the more important now that the nation found itself locked in an ideological struggle with the Soviet Union. The very survival of free society, he told the Los Angeles Council of Church Women in 1951, depended on the cultivation of an "enlightened self-interest—a self-interest attuned

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<sup>6</sup> (Ward 1953) The book's table of contents was packed with intellectual heavyweights, including the economists John Maurice Clark, Frank Knight, Kenneth Boulding, Eduard Heimann, and William Vickrey; the theologians John C. Bennett and Reinhold Niebuhr; the sociologist Robert Morrison MacIver; and the noted law professor Walton Hamilton.

to the times we are living in and not the kind of self-interest that would . . . wither on its outmoded prejudices" (Hoffman 1951).

Another NCC subunit that worked to connect abstract religious principles to concrete policy reforms was the Department of Racial and Cultural Relations (DRCR). During the 1950s and early 1960s, under the leadership of J. Oscar Lee, an African-American minister and scholar, the Department regularly issued pronouncements that cautiously advocated racial integration, while also organizing annual interracial "institutes" that brought together white and black church leaders to discuss proposals for combating the effects of discrimination in American life (Findlay 1993, pp. 28–29). In addition, every February, Lee secured airtime on around 200 radio stations and a few dozen television stations for a brief "Race Relations Sunday" message that expressed the Council's views on the state of race relations in the United States. In 1954, the message aired in every state except West Virginia, though the vast majority of participating stations were located in the Midwest, Northeast, and West Coast. Not surprisingly, few Southern station managers participated in the program (Lee 1954).

No less than the DCEL, Lee's Department regularly clothed its appeals in the familiar signs and symbols of the American civil religion, calling on white Americans to fulfill the nation's destiny of guaranteeing full equality for all its citizens. In 1957, for example, Lee recruited Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to compose the Race Relations Sunday message. King, who had recently become a household name thanks to his leading role in the Montgomery Bus Boycott, used the opportunity to present northern white churchgoers with a stark moral choice: Would they continue to indirectly aid the segregationists by preaching patience and compromise, or would they instead "embrace the eternal demands of the Almighty God" and call for the immediate "fulfillment of Christian principle[s]"? (National Council of Churches 1957). Even when the Race Relations Sunday message was in the hands of less gifted orators, the core message remained largely unchanged, and it grew progressively more uncompromising over the course of the decade. NCC President Edwin Dahlberg's 1959 message, for example, began by quoting from the prophet Micah: ". . . what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" Dahlberg then offered up a full-throated jeremiad, warning that the "shadows of injustice are falling more and more ominously across the landscape of our national life." The time had come to heed the prophet's message—as well as the Supreme Court's recent anti-segregation decisions—and begin integrating the spheres of "housing, education, recreation, industry, and religion." Failure to do so would discredit the nation's "witness for Christ in the non-Christian world"; repentance and reform, on the other hand, would allow the nation to once again "walk humbly with God and enter into His kingdom" (National Council of Churches 1959).

When internal deliberations yielded a clear consensus, policy-oriented departments like the DCEL and the DRCR forwarded draft pronouncements to the NCC's General Board, a 270-person body of clergymen and lay people that issued statements on behalf of the entire Council. Between 1952 and 1970, the Board approved roughly fifty policy pronouncements; topics ranged from federal aid to education, to arms control, to collective bargaining, to unemployment, to immigration reform, to legislative malapportionment and civil rights (Kelley 1971). The General Assembly, a much larger body composed of delegates elected from the Council's member churches, also enjoyed the authority to adopt resolutions that put the Council on record in support of—or opposition to—specific policies (though this body met only once every three years). Whether adopted by the Board or the Assembly, the resulting edicts were typically peppered with biblical references and—more to the point—allusions to the American civil religion. Echoing John Winthrop, the Assembly's February 1964 resolution in support of the pending civil rights bill warned that "[t]he eyes of the world are upon the American Congress, watching to see whether our national legislative body . . . can meet the challenge of one of the greatest moral issues of our time." Failure to pass the civil rights bill in a timely manner would "undermine . . . the confidence of all men who love liberty in the ability of the United States to advance the global struggle for freedom" ("Calls Civil Rights Moral Issue": NCC Resolution Challenges Congress to Vote for Civil Rights 1964).



The General Board's edicts did not go unnoticed. Through the end of the 1960s, major newspapers often devoted significant space to summarizing them, no doubt reasoning that they were of great interest to the millions of Americans who belonged to Council-affiliated churches. During some years in the early 1960s, the *New York Times* ran as many as twenty front-page stories on Council pronouncements or policy deliberations, often reprinting pronouncements in full in its back pages (Compton Forthcoming; "Churches Council Sets Social Code" 1954; 'Norms' Adopted to Guide Christians 1954). In addition to newspaper coverage, the NCC's media presence was amplified by federal regulations that incentivized broadcasters to offer blocks of air time, free of charge, to religious broadcasters. At the national level, the NCC soon became the de facto regulator of Protestant religious programming, and it ensured that popular radio programs such as "Frontiers of Faith"—broadcast nationally over the NBC television network—were moderated by liberal church officials who made no secret of their belief that Christians were obligated to combat social injustice wherever they encountered it (Compton Forthcoming).

## 5. Conclusions: How the Covenant Was Broken

It is probably not a coincidence that Bellah's initial essay on civil religion appeared in the immediate aftermath of the successful campaigns for the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act—campaigns in which African American activists, white religious leaders (of all faiths), and two Presidents coalesced around a common religious narrative of collective sin and redemption. Talk of the nation's providential mission was everywhere during the mid-1960s, and the passage of not one but two strong federal civil rights bills—a previously unthinkable development—meant there were good reasons to believe that civil religious appeals were capable of motivating support for ambitious national goals.

Needless to say, the picture would look very different by the middle of the following decade. Writing in the aftermath of Watergate, Bellah lamented that the American civil religion had become "an empty and broken shell" (Bellah 1975, p. 142). The problem was not simply that the nation's political leaders had betrayed the public trust; it was that average Americans now seemed to have little patience for talk of quasi-religious national obligations, let alone of national sins. Hence, when Jimmy Carter attempted, in his so-called "malaise" speech of 1979, to revive a "prophetic, judgmental version of the American civil religion," he was widely mocked (Hammond 1994, p. 3). Post-1960s Americans much preferred being praised to being judged, and the result was the rise of an ersatz civil religion that transformed a once fallible nation into an object of uncritical veneration—a religion whose most important prophet was Carter's successor, Ronald Reagan (Hammond 1994).

Bellah traced the root of the problem to "economic and technological advance[s]" that had exerted a transformative impact on citizen character. By the 1970s, he wrote, America had become a society of "mobile, competitive achievers" who were often unencumbered by the communal obligations of "families and neighborhoods," and who were largely ignorant of—and unconcerned with—the moral traditions that had shaped the nation's political development. In such a society, the signs and symbols of the "external covenant" still made cameo appearances in political rhetoric, but there was little chance that they would be brought to life by the "internal covenant" whose existence presupposed a morally engaged citizenry (Bellah 1975, p. 142). Perhaps reluctant to end on such a sour note, Bellah, somewhat paradoxically, took heart from the fact that younger Americans seemed to be turning away from traditional forms of organized religion. He observed that many young people viewed the faith traditions in which they were raised as hopelessly compromised by their links to a corrupt political and economic establishment, and he noted that several of the period's fastest growing religious movements—from the Hare Krishnas to the Jesus People—positioned themselves in opposition to the dominant culture and its power structures, including the "technical" or "liberal utilitarian" forms of reasoning on which these were based. Although no one could say what the future would bring, these diverse movements, with their apocalyptic imagery, their "ethical criticism of society," and their



“insistence on the role of a remnant that already embodies the future,” at least offered a glimmer of hope for those who longed for a “renewal” of the nation’s “religious imagination” (Bellah 1975, pp. 154–58).

The evidence examined above suggests a somewhat different explanation for the decline of the American civil religion. If post-1960s Americans became suddenly less receptive to appeals framed in the quasi-religious imagery of sin and redemption, it was at least in part because most of the *institutions* that had traditionally allowed religious elites to influence the views of average churchgoers were in disarray. The immediate problem was a sharp drop in mainline Protestant church attendance (and giving) that began around 1960 and continued through the early 1970s. With the churches starved for funds, the mainline institutional infrastructure began to wither. In the three-year period beginning in 1965, more than 10 percent of the nation’s professional church councils were disbanded. Between 1965 and 1971, the number of individuals employed by state and local councils declined by more than 20 percent, and the number of volunteer church councils shrank by a third (Compton Forthcoming; Association of Council Secretaries 1970). At the same time, the most important Protestant ecumenical body, the National Council of Churches, began laying off dozens of staff members and contemplating a variety of increasingly radical restructuring proposals (Thrapp 1970; Thrapp 1971; Thrapp 1972). Finally, as state and local church councils disbanded, and as the denominations reduced their ecumenical involvement at the local level, politically liberal ministers were deprived of a supportive network of like-minded peers, and the result may well have been to undercut their enthusiasm for challenging the preexisting convictions of their parishioners (see e.g., Stark et al. 1970).

Bellah seems to have viewed these developments as more or less unconnected to the decline of the American civil religion and the egalitarian reform agenda it had long supported. The ACR, he insisted, operated largely outside of institutional channels; and, in any event, the “quasi-therapeutic blandness” offered up by mainline religious elites seemed incapable of inspiring the sort of intense religious devotion that had once given life to nation’s creedal commitments (Bellah 1975, p. 142; Bellah et al. 2008, p. 238). But if Bellah was right that the “internal covenant” that inspired popular devotion to the ACR was never “completely captured by institutions,” he was wrong to discount the role of religious institutions in making ACR appeals meaningful to average citizens. Indeed, in the years since Bellah first lamented the decline of the American civic faith, it has become even more apparent that citizens whose religious or ethical lives take place largely outside of formal religious institutions are unlikely to be moved to action by religious themes and imagery. In an age of religious individualism, politicians and public intellectuals may still sprinkle their speeches and writings with references to national destiny, the founding covenant, or collective sin; the most gifted may even push these ideas in new and innovative directions (Gorski 2017; Kloppenberg 2011). Rarely, however, will free-floating religious appeals change the minds of citizens who were not already inclined to agree with the proposals on offer. Absent a (highly unlikely) revival of formal religious authority and institution-building, the ACR is therefore likely to remain a “broken shell.”

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